

# The Two Trees

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Two enormous elm trees are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.

Eugene O'Neill, **Desire Under the Elms**

**T**here were two enormous acacia trees standing sideways, separated by a stone-paved esplanade that seemed to forcibly separate them. Yet as though by sheer ingenuity, their branches stretched laterally in the air, reaching out to touch and caress each other. The edge of their clasp locked like the hands of two old sisters holding each other tightly, plodding patiently towards an unknown destination.

In our folk consciousness, the tree spirits protected the land and its inhabitants long before the conquistadores set foot on the archipelago. Our people believed that enormous trees—with trunks the circumference of three people locked hand-in-hand like in Matisse's "The Dance"—were portals to another world. Thus, they were revered and worshipped long ago, by our ancestors who knew that they were indwelt by the great anima. Every tree therefore, was a witness in time, each one having a distinct story to tell.

These were the two trees of my student days in this University—long before the España campus had a major facelift to welcome the institution's

four hundred founding anniversary; long before the idea of earth-balling entered the vocabulary of the nation; and definitely, long before the two rival divas of literature sang their swan songs. I have always thought of them as eternal—the two acacia trees and the two divas—outliving the best and the rest of us.

I grew up hearing stories at the Faculty of Arts and Letters when I was still a young and impressionable student—and that was more than three decades ago—of how the literary universe at Santo Tomas was divided like Philippine *showbizlandia* in the '70s between Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos. The great divide, in this case, was more academic personalities, yet the intrigues surrounding Ophelia Dimalanta and Milagros Tanlayco, oftentimes perpetrated by their warring fans, escalated to a scale which eventually polarized the literary community in the University, with each member of one camp regarded as a “usual suspect” by the prying eyes of the rival group. Writers and their sympathizers congregate around Ophelia while those of us who were most likely to become teachers, walk under the shadow of Milagros.

I had the chance to work with both of them. Like a bat that exhibits qualities of a bird because of it has wings while the rest of its body resembles a rodent, I, too was very careful in conducting myself when I was around either of them lest I reveal my true nature and offend them who were my mentors in the undergraduate years and in the Graduate School.

Both became my immediate superiors when I started a teaching career at the University in the early '90s. Back then, Dr. Tanlayco was the chair of the Department of Languages while Dr. Dimalanta was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters. When I was taken in as an Instructor in 1992, Dr. Tanlayco said that she and Ophelia seldom agree on sundry matters, but in my case, both of them acquiesced to my teaching at the Royal and Pontifical University.

In one awkward meeting at the narrow but well-lighted corridor of the old Graduate School, Dr. Tanlayco and I accidentally came across Dean Dimalanta, after I had just submitted my application letter, together with my curriculum vitae, to the department chair. Dr. Tanlayco then, introduced me to the Dean.

Dr. Tanlayco, said, “This is the renowned Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters, Dr. Ophelia Dimalanta, and Dean Dimalanta, may I present

to you the newest member of our Faculty whom I recruited to teach in AB...”

And even before Dr. Tanlayco could finish her next statement, Dr. Dimalanta told Ma’am Mila, “Of course, Mila, I know him. He was my student in the Graduate School and I invited him to teach here.”

As the biblical saying goes, no servant can serve two masters at the same time. You will love one and hate the other. As a matter of course, it happened that sometimes I hated Ophelia and loved Milagros; other times I resented Milagros and adored Ophelia. But there were sunshine days when being with either of them enabled me to experienced moments of intense joy.

Because what was at stake was loyalty or love, one would most likely become a pendulum swinging from end to end in dizzying ways, trying to win the approval or affection of both sides. But something had to give. True enough, it did not take me very long to finally create two alters, who had to separately deal with this schizophrenic predicament that I was in. As the British psychoanalyst Ronald Laing, said, this is how we cope with the challenges and demands of the modern times.

For all their different personalities within and beyond the four walls of the institution, both Tanlayco and Dimalanta exuded admirable poise and confidence amidst pressures and difficulties; both exhibited different styles of nurturing, loving, and caring; and lastly, both were two strong women who had their own unique ways of teaching and managing their turfs.

Dr. Tanlayco was the harder taskmaster. Like Pharaoh’s governor charged with the enormous task of building monumental structures, Dr. Tanlayco’s whip was her tongue which was as strong and hard-hitting as the tail of a stingray lashing violently at her prey. Her herculean duty included overseeing a Department composed of more than a hundred faculty members teaching English. Literature, Filipino, Spanish, and Art Appreciation, making sure that all efficiently and effectively did the work put square on their shoulders. This was no mean feat inasmuch as these faculty members come from different colleges, with their loyalties to their respective deans and their own personal interests. Dr. Tanlayco authoritatively steered the Department toward new heights: rebuilding the confidence of the young by equipping them with the knowledge they ought to possess as teachers

of their respective disciplines through in-house trainings and off-campus seminars; and, more importantly, instilling in the faculty, young and old alike, the value of discipline, loyalty, and dedication. In her wise estimate, there were the strong foundations of a long and lasting teaching career in the University. Dr. Tanlayco did not mince her words. She belonged to the school of hard-knocks. Everyone within the ambit of her displeasure—late-comers, moonlighters and liars—became easy targets of her rant and rage. A colleague in the Department aptly described our communal impression and collective reaction regarding Dr. Tanlayco's draconian administration, when she said that, "Next to the fear of God, is the fear of Tanlayco."

Dr. Dimalanta on the other hand, was more liberal, allowing you to do your work, your own way. She gave each person enough latitude and space for maneuvering, particularly, if she believed in the individual. Students and faculty alike had their experience of liberalism when she was the Dean, which brought out the best and the worst in them. Students were allowed to think on their own with their leaders as their most vocal mouthpieces on issues like tuition fee increase, quality instruction, and the school uniform. Teachers who were products of the old dispensation found her management skills wanting, while others tested the limits of their academic freedom to embarrassing extremes. Her horror roll, a spoof of the outstanding teacher registry, was condemned as vindictively disparaging especially by those who made to the list. The acerbic comments and snide remarks articulated by her fully-defined blood-red lips, though passionately poetic, impale her victims, condemning them to their messy metaphorical deaths. She had her favourites, no doubt about it, and she did not blush when showing her preference in the public. For this matter, she was loved by many and hated by the rest. And Ophelia could hurt deeply those whom she loved and those who loved and these who loved her. This was her version of love, a bloodbath of passion, and carnage of elemental desire. This *carriño* brutal, I suppose, stemmed from an abandonment issue which is the a nuanced undertone in her poems "Finder Loser," "Stowaway Love," "Loser Keeper," "This One Legacy," and "Waiting Game."

The administrative control of a Tanlayco was tempered by the tolerance of a Dimalanta. It would have been unimaginable to survive had the two been equally exacting in their ways and in their means. Whether they were two sides of the coin or were polar opposites, they complemented and supplemented each other in and out of the offices they

occupied, the classrooms they presided over, and in their respective dominions where they reigned supreme as queens. Dr. Tanlayco once confessed that there was a division of labour in the literary education at UST: while she established the foundations, Dr. Dimalanta built upon it a magnificent edifice.

In the classroom, both were fierce gatekeepers of knowledge. They would not allow intellectual poachers in their territories, nor would charlatans go unpunished the moment their forking paths crossed. They performed to the best of their abilities the courses which they handled with much ease and facility. Ma'am Mila, was legendary for calling her students "creatures," wearing lace gloves and using coloured chalk, while Ma'am Ophie was famous for her short skirts which revealed a well-sculpted pair of shapely sexy legs. Tanlayco's booming voice was matched by Dimalanta's well-modulated expressions. Yet their command of the language was as impeccable as their style of dressing—classic, age-appropriate, and dignified. Ma'am Mila was more traditional in her choice of clothes as well as her values, while Ma'am Ophie breathed in every facet of her being, an air of modernity.

There was a time when some younger faculty members saw the overwhelming canopy of these two great trees as an obstacle to their professional growth. To them, the towering stature of a Tanlayco and a Dimalanta prevented the sunlight of opportunities from reaching any upstart below, so that they could gloriously bask in their own share of the golden rays of fame and popularity. These saplings did not understand that they needed protection against the harmful elements in their environment, such as the scorching heat and air-borne pests that would plague their existence. These two literary matriarchs shielded us from all sorts of power trippers, and megalomaniacs mushrooming in our midst, the kind who feed on the innocence of the young and the vulnerability of the inexperienced. Dr. Tanlayco and Dr. Dimalanta nurtured and nourished us, supervising and facilitating our growth and development as persons and as professionals; but most importantly they defended us—fearlessly fighting tooth and nail any predator—and protected us, against any mean-spirited individuals who undermined our integrity and trampled upon our dignity.

The year 2010 was a bad one for us literature teachers in the University. We lost Inang (dearest mother, as I so fondly call Dr. Tanlayco) in the

heat of the May elections, while Opalyn's (the precious gem of Thomasian Literature, an epithet for Dr. Dimalanta) "one final say" happened in November, in the year of the metal tiger.

In Amy Tan's "Joy Luck Club" An Mei Hsu remembers how one night, her wayward mother, who had been disowned by her family, came back to perform the unimaginable: she rolled up her sleeves to cut her flesh, mixed it with a bowl of soup and feed it to her dying mother. I recalled her saying that only the most dutiful of daughters would do such a painful thing to honour her mother. In one supreme moment of gratitude, I, who have had this tremendous fear of coffins and corpses, did the inconceivable. Since I would never allow my two dearest divas to look dreadful for their last show, I had to personally supervise their make-over and styling, even touching their cold, lifeless bodies like some little match girl, who finally embraced the cruel winter of human indifference.

Ma'am Mila looked very regal in her violet mestiza gown made of heavily embroidered Spanish lace, complete with butterfly sleeves. Her hair coiffed in the style of the 60's—well sculpted, side-swept bangs ending in a French twist at the back. She wore an elegant amethyst pendant with a gold chain and matching dangling earrings. Her magenta-colored lipstick complemented the back and purple shades of her eyelids. Meanwhile, Ma'am Ophie appeared stunning in her classic black silk dress with a crimson, corded lace blouse accented with a black and silver lame scarf. Her pearl earrings set in platinum matched her designer's watch set in silver, studded with rows and rows of rhinestones. Her short bouffant hair, teased at the crown to achieve volume and height went well with her well-contoured dark brows and ruby red lips.

Dr. Tanlayco and Dr. Dimalanta had a lot of things in common in life and in death: both were born on the year of the monkey; both graduated from the University of Santo Tomas; both had an unparalleled passion for Literature; both became top administrators of UST; both were given a brief furlough from teaching just before their deaths; both passed on to the next life because of a heart attack in the year of the metal tiger; and lastly, their mortal remains were reduced to ashes in the incinerator of the La Loma Cemetery Crematorium.

The changing of the guard came too soon, with none among us in the University able to fill the gargantuan shoes they left behind in their

rush to pass on to the next life. Like Dickinson's birds that stay, we each had to mature overnight just to continue, in our own small way, the vision and the legacy of our highly esteemed literary forebears.

I do not see these two old acacia trees anymore in the campus. I think that they were the first to go when the entire campus underwent extreme renovation in preparation for the University's Quadricentenary. Like these two beloved literary icons of teaching and writing in the University, who did not live to witness the pomp and pageantry of this once-in-a-lifetime event, so were these two ancient pillars unable to experience bathing breathlessly under the neon blooms and brilliant showers of this University's unending grace.